

The Girl on the Raft

— AN ESSAY BY —

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Here's a game for readers of *The Girl of the Lake*: find the girl of the lake in each of the stories. I didn't set the puzzle on purpose—these stories were written over the course of ten years with no conscious reference to one another—but when the title story gave its title to the book, something clicked.

I realized that in one form or another, that girl of the lake (call her woman) is in every story. And in all of my novels, all of my nonfiction books, too.

Water and all.

WHEN I WAS TWELVE, midway through the sweet miseries of junior high, my family took a week at Newfound Lake in New Hampshire, where old friends of my parents' had decided to gather. My older brother brought his girlfriend, and the two of them made me sick with their cooing and billing and walking off together into the forested fairylands behind the cluster of cottages that shared a rocky beach, that crystal water lapping the shore, mountains distant, reflected. My younger siblings had their own worlds, too, buckets and shovels and sand castles. My only respite was a dented old Grumman canoe, that and the communal raft that floated so placidly far out there in the sun—too much shade shoreward, huge red oaks. This would be around 1965. I never had a bathing suit but cutoff jeans that would stay wet for hours. I'd swim out to the raft and lie there daydreaming, the raft of no interest to the adults—the adults gathered in lawn chairs and roared with laughter, shouted instructions to the new swimmers, offered deviled eggs. Or I'd paddle the canoe out and tie it to the raft such that if adults started shouting about everyone, time for a swim, I could climb in it and paddle off

and around the point and out of sight, just bob there in perfect adolescent solitude.

One hot morning there was a girl on the raft. She lay on her back with her hands behind her head and her feet crossed at the ankles, hair blonder than blond, bathing suit just a shade pinker than her skin, a tattered high-waisted two-piece from an earlier era: bikinis hadn't made it to inland New Hampshire, not yet. I paddled past her in the Grumman, silently, the way I'd learned at Boy Scout camp in case there were Nazi U-boats below. I didn't look, but somehow I saw her freckles, her flat chest, her dreams behind closed eyes, all very appealing: she was twelve, too, something you just knew.

I paddled around the point all disturbed by her, and doubly disturbed by being disturbed at all, floated along an undeveloped part of the shore, a loon my only company, big, confident bird diving, coming back up, diving, coming back up. I turned it into a game, guessed where I'd see him next. I decided it would be easy to say hi to the girl, made a resolution.

I paddled back, but she was gone from the raft.

The next morning she was there again, same bathing suit, same posture, ankles crossed the other way, all of her pinker yet. We didn't know about sunscreen then, just Sea and Ski tanning lotion, that citrusy fragrance, which I caught as I secretly paddled past. I kept going, too shy to hail her, paddled around the point to visit my loon. On the way back, the girl was still there. She'd turned onto her tummy. Again I'd made a resolution, but this time I managed to speak: "Hi."

She started, rolled to face the interloper, shielding her eyes from the sun. She didn't say hi, didn't say anything, but pursed her lips in a kind of smile, maybe the best she could do. What I felt just then I hadn't ever felt before.

The next morning I played horseshoes with the little kids and watched my brother walk off with his girl—they'd found a pond of their own at the end of a long trail and would come back in the late afternoon, leaves and pine needles in their hair. Lunch with the grown-ups—Mr. Lindblad made the best grilled cheese.

I never did see which cottage she came from but then there she was on the raft, lying on her back, her ankles crossed as always, maybe getting a little browner than pink, seeming longer, too, as if she were growing.

The littler kids had commandeered the canoe and were swamping it, the greatest game in the world, so I'd formerly thought, turning the canoe belly up and swimming under it, making echo-y imprecations under there. Mr. Northrup had asked me to watch them, so that's what I did, an eye to the raft—the girl out there, the girl out there, the girl out there, and then, when I wasn't looking, she disappeared, was gone.

The next two days, rain, which meant Monopoly and Clue and various card games and brownies and the adults and the older teens going off in cars and leaving me in charge. The raft tugged at its mooring in the wind. The Northrups were in Cottage A, my family in Cottage B, the Lindblads in Cottage C. Over a rocky promontory was Cottage D, the only possibility. I watched it in the rain through our big windows but never saw anything happening there.

Sun again. And the girl was on the raft, ankles crossed, skin truly brown now, hair, if possible, lighter, doubtless freckles having spread. I hurried to organize the younger kids into landward games and paddled out to the raft.

"Hi," I said, and climbed on, an awkward proposition. She shielded her eyes, looked at me long, didn't say a word, just that tight smile, maybe a notch more friendly. I lay on my back as far from her as the raft would permit, but still within an intimate space. She turned on her side, and so I did, too, and we were facing one another, seeing one another, sweetest long gaze, and that feeling I'd had intensified to excruciating proportions. She lay back again, extended a hand toward me, and so I lay back and extended mine such that our fingertips were no more than a foot apart. And we day-dreamed in tandem, I was sure of it. She was humming something, very happily humming something. Maybe the Beatles. Isn't it good, Norwegian wood. After a long and dreamy half hour in the hot sun I felt the raft bob and let my eyes crack open only to spy her getting ready to dive, perfect form, her old suit sagging in the bottom. And then she did dive, and the raft spun, and the canoe clonged against it. She swam perfectly to shore, waded up out of the water, turned back to look at me, this long moment. I hurried to untie the canoe, climbed into it, but in those seconds she'd gone utterly missing. She'd never said a word.

I thought about her for years, made it something of a ghost story in my head, though no doubt there was an explanation.

Helping my fantasy along, Mr. Northrup said there was no one in Cottage D, hadn't been all summer. There'd been some kind of family tragedy over there. He wasn't clearer about it than that—there were little children around. There was me, too, and you just didn't talk that way around youngsters, even if they were twelve. No doubt other folks and families had access to the raft, to the beach. No doubt, yes, a sensible, everyday kind of explanation. But I turned my powerful emotion into a story I only told myself, embellished for myself, a much better story than mere regret: my girl was a spirit.

I guess I wrote "The Girl of the Lake" to tell myself that ghost story again, a total transmutation, nothing left of the original, slight event, unconscious association, all bobbing on a raft. And I wrote the rest of this collection to tell more of those stories, to call up the shades of other girls and women (and boys and men, of course) and the lakes and oceans, rivers and seas, and simple human tides that give me all my stories, really.